

# "The Earth is Not Flat Any More": Reflections on the Impact of a Rural/Urban Educational Leadership Exchange on Place-Based Instruction

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with the Graduate Studies Cohort<sup>1</sup>

Why we got geography?

Because we go from place to place. Because the earth use to be flat and had four corners, and you could jump off from any of the corners.

But now the earth is not flat any more. Now it is round all over. Now it is a globe, a ball, round all over, and we would all fall off it and tumble away into space if it wasn't for the magnetic poles. And when you dance it is the North Pole or the South Pole pulling on your feet like magnets to keep your feet on the earth.

And that's why we got geography.

And it's nice to have it that way.

- from "Lines Written for Gene Kelley to Dance to"  
by Carl Sandburg<sup>2</sup>

## Introduction

In May of 2004, an educational administration doctoral cohort of ten East Tennessee K-12 teachers and administrators visited a sample of Cincinnati public schools. This Rural/Urban Educational Leadership Exchange<sup>3</sup> was coordinated through the educational administration departments of the University of Tennessee in Knoxville (UTK) and the University of Cincinnati (UC) as part of the Urban Educational Leadership Program based at UC. The purpose of the educational exchange was to allow the participants to enhance their understanding of the difference location makes on K-12 education, discover underlying themes that transcend location, and seek out a "compassionate sense of place" with members from both groups sharing their own educational stories, settings, and realities.<sup>4</sup>

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At its heart, the Knoxville/Cincinnati exchange was a vehicle for the two doctoral groups to learn together. Fullan has observed that such learning is meaning-making that requires a radically new way of approaching education, one that guides the development of individual minds through many minds working together.<sup>5</sup> According to Furman and Starrat, the only way to achieve our visions of schooling is to commit to work together on important problems, even with those who are different from us, and to commit to share our stories and respect the views of others.<sup>6</sup> As rural educational leaders, the UTK cohort planned to visit various schools in the urban setting to gain insights from these alternative perspectives that would help them look at their own places through new lenses. Next spring, it is hoped that the UC cohort will experience schools in a rural context by traveling to East Tennessee.

The affective influence of place in education is critical. The rural/urban program was attempting, as Gruenewald stated, to "contribute to a theory of place as a multidisciplinary construct for cultural analysis."<sup>7</sup> Ross indicated that in the comparative learning process, individuals learn not only what they study, but they learn how to gain knowledge from each other cross-culturally.<sup>8</sup> The purpose of this article is to examine the process adult learners go through when they leave their familiar place and engage in learning with others in a strange or unfamiliar context.

The schools the UTK cohort visited in Cincinnati, Ohio, coordinated by members from the UC cohort, included a Montessori-based middle and high school, a traditional instructional methods high school, and an elementary school with a foreign language-based curriculum. Each school exposed the group to a variety of teaching styles and school cultures. After the visits, the two university groups engaged in dialog about the impact of these experiences, shared struggles across their different educational contexts, and found common ground between the two settings. Upon returning to the Knoxville, each student in the UTK cohort produced a written reflection about the experiences in Cincinnati that had the greatest impact on his/her educational beliefs or practices. Students analyzed the experiences both cognitively (evaluating them) and affectively (adding in perceptions and interpretations about the events). According to Gruenewald, people are capable of perceiving places and learning from that direct experience.<sup>9</sup> Therefore, the reflections concluded with each student creating a future action plan based on what was learned. The group decided that while the experiences in Cincinnati themselves were worthwhile, the process of learning by leaving a familiar place and entering into learning in a new context with others was invaluable. The written reflections were then collected and analyzed for themes of learning to produce this article.

## Review of Literature

Ross described a long-term alliance in *An Opportunity for Cross-Cultural, Project-Based Learning on the Internet in My Place, Your Place, and Our Place*, a curriculum and instruction model that provides experiential learning opportunities in both local and global contexts.<sup>10</sup> The concept of *My Place*, learning how to function in one's own culture, is essential for survival and seems natural and logical. Learning or understanding diverse cultures, *Your Place*, can be a challenge to individuals who live in isolated communities. An approach to global learning can be accomplished through a personal relationship between two cultures. In this one-on-one comparative learning process, individuals learn not only what they learn but also how to

learn from each other. This final stage in the learning process is *Our Place*, the world that all people have in common. The overall goal is to examine and understand from each *place* what is fundamental to *all places* and to learn and apply the knowledge, attitudes, behaviors, and skills that will allow individuals to be productive in *Our Place*.<sup>11</sup>

Although the influence of place has been studied in broad contexts,<sup>12</sup> Gruenewald asserted, "Educational research, theory, and practice need to pay more attention to places."<sup>13</sup> Indeed, although colleges of education at many universities have partnerships with local K-12 school systems, these collaborations tend to depend on specific grant funding and have a short-term focus.<sup>14</sup> Ross's emphasis is not on educating students to compete in the global economy, but on preparing them to cooperate in global maintenance and management. Gruenewald set place apart from a mere locality in stating that "location" is space and time dependent; "place" is not.<sup>15</sup> As Ross's manuscript makes plain, place is not bound by country or nationality.<sup>16</sup>

Furman and Starrat maintained that the anticipation of the commitment to work together with people who are different from oneself; to communicate and engage in dialogue; to share stories; and to respect others' views is an important educational process.<sup>17</sup> Ross, Smith, and Roberts suggested that another important piece of the educational process is the commitment to collective inquiry in a learning community.<sup>18</sup> This is enhanced by collaborating with educational professionals who live and work in very different situations. Senge, Kleiner, Ross, Smith, and Roberts theorized that when this level of collaboration occurs, all members of the groups stand to gain insight, empathy, understanding, and ideas for future innovation.<sup>19</sup>

In an age when living and working in a global community is accepted in the educational system, Ramler encourages educators to lead learners to understand and respect cultures other than their own so that they can live and work with people from all around the shrinking globe.<sup>20</sup> According to Ramler, learning to see through the eyes, minds, and hearts of others is important to the process of education.<sup>21</sup> Gruenewald argued that what we learn and come to know is shaped by the places we experience and the attention we give to other places.<sup>22</sup> Gruenewald continued that it is the gained perspectives that can advance theory, research, and practice in education.<sup>23</sup> The aim of becoming more aware of places is to extend our perception of pedagogy and responsibility outward from ourselves. Additionally, Gruenewald maintained that the expanded knowledge becomes more significant to the lived experience of students and teachers.<sup>24</sup> Responsibility is redefined and conceptualized so that other places matter to educators, students, and citizens in concrete ways. Our expanded knowledge forges within us the ability to become more responsible citizens within our own place.

## Methods

Much work has been done on how place-based teaching and learning impact children; however, the findings in this study append a richness of experience to the theory of place-conscience education using the context and characters of adult education and adult learners.<sup>25</sup> This research was an exploratory case study. The researchers sought to gain insight into the development of both cognitive and affective understandings of place that resulted from the group's visits to the Cincinnati schools. Ten reflections were collected from the cohort members upon their return from these visits to three schools in Cincinnati. Each reflection focused on the reciprocal impact that

the visit had on the perceptions of the students' own place. The students analyzed their experiences in the Cincinnati schools, and the resultant changes occurring in their perceptions of their own places precipitated by these experiences.

Using Maxwell's categorizing strategy of qualitative data analysis, the researchers attempted to gain further understanding of the data.<sup>26</sup> The reflections were then analyzed using Ethnograph software.<sup>27</sup> The researchers developed codes from the reflections and Gruenewald's theory of place by using Merriam's constant comparative analysis.<sup>28,29</sup> Each code went through several iterations as the researchers gained further understanding of the data. The codes were then constructed into themes under Merriam's technique of category construction.<sup>30</sup> Groups of codes with recurring patterns were assembled into the themes that served as the general structure for understanding the process of reciprocal reflection that the cohort underwent on the trip. These themes were also developed using an iterative process of constantly revisiting the raw data to confirm and revise the themes.

The researchers also employed Fielding and Fielding's investigator triangulation method through three researchers independently analyzing the same set of data.<sup>31</sup> Once the independent analyses were complete, the researchers then met to come to an agreement on the final analysis. In addition to the triangulation method employed in the study, trustworthiness was furthered by the use of verbatim quotes from the documents, an audit trail, and the researchers' reaching the point of saturation.

The members of the UTK cohort consist of educational administrators and educators working in east Tennessee schools or districts. They include three principals, an assistant superintendent, two teachers, a special education administrator, a director of student living at a residential school for the deaf, a central office science supervisor, and a federal programs coordinator. All ten members are white, and over half of them have lived and worked in rural or suburban settings throughout their educational careers. Although East Tennessee has economic diversity equivalent to any urban area, until recently very little racial, ethnic, or linguistic diversity existed. Changing demographics, new educational challenges, and the recent legislation of the *No Child Left Behind Act of 2001*<sup>32</sup> sparked the interest in members of the UTK cohort to go out and see how other schools and districts were coping with these issues. In addition, the recognition that urban districts and schools probably had a lot of experience in dealing with issues of funding, meeting the needs of diverse learners, and providing innovative programming options appealed to the cohort. A professor at UTK, who had worked on the initial urban research center in Houston, contacted a professor engaged in the current urban research center at the University of Cincinnati (UC), and the Urban/Rural Exchange was formed. The educational administration and policy cohort at UC agreed to host the UTK cohort and to introduce them to several urban schools in the area.

## Findings and Analysis

The trip to Cincinnati generated excitement among members of the UTK cohort about the possibilities for schools and enthusiasm about possible future collaboration at the higher education level between educators in different places. One member said she felt a sense of renewal and hope upon returning from this trip. In addition, the learning that occurred on the trip carried over into class discussions back at UTK where student frequently cited examples from their experiences in Cincinnati. While the overall feeling about the ex-

perience was positive, people do not generally encounter unfamiliar settings eagerly. This case study examined the stages through which UTK cohort members progressed in order to reach deeper understandings in education and a “compassionate sense of place.”

### *Adventuring Into the Unknown*

While excited about the prospect of learning from educators in a place very different from their own, the UTK cohort approached the trip cautiously. Fear of the unknown is a universal trait and is evidenced in some of the reflections below from members of the UT cohort:

I immediately developed a nervous and somewhat anxious feeling about what we would encounter in our school visits. I have never visited a school outside of mid-South. I envisioned the schools being totally land-locked with no resemblance to what I know to be a school setting: large green fields, playgrounds with brightly colored play sets, football stadiums, and outdoor basketball courts, just to name a few of my thoughts.

Having lived all my life in the South—having worked all my life in small rural schools—the idea of visiting a large urban city like Cincinnati was at first daunting.

The Cincinnati Public Schools are approximately 70% African-American. Most of our school systems are 85% to 90% white. This was a sort of culture shock for those of us who had spent their careers in the rural South.

I experienced a whole gamut of feelings and emotions in our three days in Cincinnati. There was fear and trepidation just from the fact of going into inner city schools and operating within the inner city.

However, as Palmer wrote, moving through this fear is a necessary step in encountering new knowledge:

If we are to open up a space for knowing, we must be alert to our fear of not knowing... we must see that not knowing is simply the first step toward truth, that the anxiety created by our ignorance calls not for instant answers but for an adventure into the unknown.<sup>33</sup>

As evidenced in the reflections of the UTK cohort below, leaving one's place and adventuring into the unknown opens the mind to new possibilities, widens the lens through which one views the world, and stimulates learning:

The journey influenced me to “think outside the box.”

The experience of going outside of your normal environment and looking at how education is offered in another community provides new insights.

Overall, it was important for me to see how other educators in other places operate. It opened my vistas to a wider realm of possibility.

I want to end with a note about how stepping outside of your own context enables you to put on a whole new set of glasses, to see what you are blinded to by habit and routine, and to experience anew your own reality in another place.

The “lessons learned” from this experience are a direct result of coming into contact with the unknown. Palmer used the biblical example: “...God is always using the stranger to introduce the strangeness of truth.”<sup>34</sup> Going into a strange place enabled members of the UT cohort to encounter some new truths:

I have learned that the idea of care transcends all boundaries: urban; rural; elementary; middle; high; races; and educational levels.

This entire experience has brought home to me the importance of being a life-long learner. Many of the problems that we saw in Cincinnati are the results of people doing things the way we have always done. Many of the good things that we saw in Cincinnati are the results of people who are life-long learners.

The viewpoint from an observer's seat enabled me to see the ills of my teaching hidden to me from the viewpoint of the teacher's podium. I will take this new perspective and strive to be a better teacher for it.

The experiences that we each described in our school visits will have a significant influence on how we view the individual problems that we face in our schools and school systems.

I felt that the overall experience was exceptional. As a profession, educators tend to want to stay in their comfort levels. This was outside of our realm of experience as a whole, and I feel it opened our eyes to a wider world. Not only that, it made us appreciate our own place.

The investigation of this process provided many useful insights. Understanding this process allowed us to get more from our experiences of places outside our own. Reflection brought to light many differences but also allowed the students to see that these differences were unifying instead of divisive. The process of grappling with the incongruencies of several places can lead to greater comfort in knowing that we exist not in “my place” or “your place”, but in “our place”.

### *Connecting and Grappling*

When people go to a strange place or adventure into the unknown, they instinctively engage in two thought processes. First, they make any connection they can between the strange place and their own familiar place. They cling to any similarities they find because these connections help make sense of what they encounter. It is the process described often in the work of such theorists as Dewey: working from what is known in order to understand the unknown.<sup>35</sup> Members of the UTK cohort described some of the connections they made to their place while they experienced urban schools as follows:

Witnessing the stark contrast between the Russian classroom and the ESL [English as a Second Language] room made me reflect on the situation at my school. I first thought of my own classroom.

We do have a few schools where the environment is [discouraging], and we have teachers who have the teacher's heart to work and remain working at those schools.

I felt as though I was in a school setting that I knew and had experienced before. The building was obviously in need of repair and maintenance, but I had seen this before also.

I learned that the problems that we face in our schools are similar to the problems that the educators in Cincinnati face daily as well. With the standards movement in education, every school faces the challenges of meeting the standards, and therefore the problems that arise are very similar in nature no matter where a school is located or what programs that they use.

The second thought process people engage in surfaces from the differences and inconsistencies they encounter between their familiar place, or what they believe should occur, and a strange place, or what actually occurs. They begin to grapple with the questions that result from uncomfortable feelings of disequilibria. According to Sizer and Sizer, "Grappling is a necessary balancing act" that provides a "distant mirror, the meaning of one's immediate condition viewed against the sweep of human and environmental experience, past and present."<sup>36</sup> Evidence from the reflections below confirmed that members of the UTK cohort indeed engaged in the process of grappling with what they encountered:

I am reporting what I saw and experienced and asking if this is the way things should be.

How long might Palmer's "heart of a teacher" beat in these [troubled] schools?<sup>37</sup>

I was sure that students of this age could learn a second language, but given the setting and the situation, I was a little unsure about how speaking Russian could help these children to become successful in life.

What could their lives as students be like if given the chance? What would it take to make these kids into partners in the pursuit of their own possibilities rather than faceless enemies who must be herded through hallways?

The implication of school choice as the government's answer is troubling. I am also disturbed by the realization that driving just a few miles across a beautiful city finds such diverse educational opportunities.

Making connections to what we already know and grappling with inconsistencies between our beliefs and the realities we encounter is a powerful tool in creating the necessary stage for reflection and, ultimately, deeper understandings. Dewey advocated reflective thinking, emphasizing that "one can think reflectively only when... willing to endure suspense and to undergo the trouble of searching."<sup>38</sup> Making connections and grappling with inconsistencies occurs naturally when we leave our familiar contexts and adventure into the unknown.

#### *Dispelling Old Myths and Creating New Stories*

Palmer wrote, "...before we encounter truth, we must first wrestle with the demons of untruth..."<sup>39</sup> Members of the UTK cohort found themselves in exactly this position as they entered and observed

urban schools in Cincinnati. They had come to this new place full of ideas about what they would see and how they would feel, as follows:

I had a preconceived notion that the majority of students in the Cincinnati schools had a predetermined fate in life—a troubled home life, little parental support, and no hope for a bright, successful future.

What they found dispelled firmly held myths about inner-city schools, children, and education. For example, the UTK cohort were taken aback by the lack of dress codes, air conditioning (in May), and facility upkeep in several settings. However, in discussions following the visits, the cohort came to realize that these physical criteria were incidental to the actual process of learning:

After seeing these three schools, I realize that effective learning and teaching can occur in any setting. Students' success in education depends not on the location of buildings, but on the expectations, caring, and passion of the adults who have the responsibility and opportunities to teach them.

The trip to Cincinnati, Ohio to tour three urban schools was a perfect example of the reason one should not stereotype. Before our visit, I assumed we would see typical urban schools that reflected inadequate facilities, apathy, and behavior problems among students, and lack of student learning, ineffective teaching, and inferior leadership. What I observed caused me to change my previously held beliefs about inner-city schools and the wonderful opportunities that some students have in some of these settings.

These kids are having fun. They are becoming fluent in an influential language, and they attend an inner-city kindergarten.

I felt a lot of positive emotions... a sense of awe, warmth, and excitement as I watched these children perform wildly beyond my personal expectations.

With my skepticism mounting, we strolled toward our first classroom visitation. When we entered building B, my first impression was immediately invalidated. Hanging on the walls of the hallways were poems written in Chinese and maps in Arabic. I thought something special really could be going on here.

The process of dispelling old myths allows a space to open up where new beliefs can be born. Gruenewald, in his conclusions about the impact of place-conscious education stated, "What we know is, in large part, shaped by the places we experience and the quality we give them."<sup>40</sup> When we leave familiar places, dispel myths about different places, and encounter quality in new ways, we are then able to create new beliefs, understandings, and appreciations that apply to both places:

I came away realizing anew that the greatest variable in student learning and success is the teacher. I also realized that great teaching and learning can be occurring, but standardized test scores can be low.

This youngster had an interest in what he was learning. He loved that others were watching him. His actions, demeanor, interest, and effort just stood out to me, and I could not help but begin to realize how learning the Russian language had influenced this young student. My question of what benefit is teaching a foreign language to students was being answered right in front of my face!

I now realize through the experience of visiting a different school system that I am to the point where I am buying into the reconstructivist philosophy, or rather, it is becoming clearer that this is the one means of supporting substantial changes in our educational system.

This experience has greatly affected me as an administrator. I now realize how easy it is to establish expectations that are not consistent for every student within my school. Just because a student has low socioeconomic status does not excuse them from achieving at the same level as every other student.

The trip to Cincinnati—taken to provide two groups of educational professionals, one urban, one rural, different experiences to approach learning—turned out to uncover profound insights about my work and my self-concept.

Not all new insights or beliefs from visiting another place occur in the shape of realizations. They are also formed by confirming hunches or previously held beliefs and by witnessing philosophy in action, as follows:

The experience of visiting actual places of learning that embody and embrace a child-centered, caring, and truly social reconstructive purpose of education confirms what I believe about schooling, children, and the educational future to which this country should aspire.

I confirmed a lot of previous beliefs, strengthened others, and encountered completely new experiences that help bolster my philosophy and beliefs about education and about kids.

The experience reinforced my belief that a new language should be taught at a young age.

I have had a gut feeling about the possibilities of taking any kind of child and motivating them in the right environment to exceed our wildest educational hopes. My shelves are full of books that tell me about examples of people who have created such places and kids who have emerged from them. I have studied, almost fanatically, how to make places like this come into being and how to sustain them against an educational agenda that seeks to destroy them, but until this trip, I had never seen one in real life. Now I have a realistic face to place on my dreamy possibilities for schools.

Even confirming educational hunches can be inspiring to veteran educators who are often isolated in their own worlds of practice. Having a true story example on which to hang your educational philosophy is unfortunately rare in the minds of many educators.

### *Becoming Pedagogical Connoisseurs*

Even though members of the UTK cohort were afforded a new set of lenses from which to view education in action, they framed what they saw through familiar contexts. As educators and administrators, they took extensive note of pedagogical, leadership, and programming aspects of the schools they visited and ultimately made judgments about their merit, as follows:

The children seemed thrilled about their learning. The songs, dances, and games that filled the 50-minute class excited the students about their learning. The students' exhilaration was only heightened by the extraordinary energy and enthusiasm displayed by the teachers.

It was amazing to see the students so actively engaged in their learning and teachers who obviously took great pride in their work.

The reality is that creating a meaningful educational experience is an awful lot of work.

First, leadership within the school had to be both visionary for the principal and participatory for the teachers, parents, and students.

Delving into their own intellectual resources and educational experiences, the UTK students recognized good and poor practice:

The Russian classroom could serve as a model for Greene's ideas on the integration of art and imagination in a classroom.<sup>41</sup> The ESL room seemed embedded in what Glasser refers to as stimulus/response teaching.<sup>42</sup> The ESL students were coerced into doing as the teacher wanted based on the fear of reprisal whereas the Russian students chose to participate because the learning was fun. I was amazed that two classrooms, especially in such close proximity, could reflect such different philosophies in teaching and learning.

They were able to engage the students in what seemed an effortless manner. The students seemed to be developing a love for learning. The teachers seemed to be creating child-centered learning. The focus was on the needs of the students and on doing whatever was necessary for those students to learn.

We saw innovative curriculum, an experimental curriculum, and a [status quo] curriculum.

The programs we experienced at the language school provided an atmosphere that drew you into the curriculum. From the first graders in the Russian class to the fifth graders in the Japanese class, the energy was high, the motivation was intrinsic, and the learning was evident. The whole of the instructional program was what one would hope to find in every classroom.

The faces at this school reveal a realized *I Have a Dream* speech; the human capital exceeds it. This is the kind of school people make excuses for [not matching]. It is the kind of school people say their schools could imitate if only...

These judgments appeared to lead to an expanded pedagogical knowledge base for the UTK participants. This trend reflects Gruenewald's insistence that we learn "to listen to what places are telling us- and to respond as informed citizens- this is the pedagogical challenge of place-conscious education."<sup>43</sup> Students commented:

I was most impressed with the nontraditional ways that instruction was implemented, the respectfulness between teachers and students, the high level of support of students, the contracts between students and the school and between teachers and new teachers, the length of time students ride buses to go to this school, and the non-traditional curriculum.

These students were not just being taught to speak a language. They were developing social skills, cultural awareness, and self-esteem, which is what we should be teaching every child in our country.

Students in this school were getting a much more "well rounded" education than children in traditional schools.

Although the UTK cohort was not in Cincinnati to evaluate the schools visited, we can not avoid making judgments about what we see based on what is familiar to us. People seem wired to notice what is different about a new experience before they tune into what is similar about it. Perhaps this is why Ross cautions us to take the next step in this comparative, cross-cultural learning process: learn not only what there is to learn from each other, but also how to learn from each other.<sup>44</sup>

### *Choosing Between Comfort and Change*

The final stage of the process through which the UT students progressed in their encounters in the Cincinnati schools was a fork in the road for most participants. When people visit unfamiliar places and are estranged from their familiar places, they have two choices. They either reject what they encounter and return to the comforts and familiarity of home, or they internalize new insights which compel them to want to create change. There is evidence of both in the reflections below:

But the real take-away action plan for me is remembering to keep up with what is happening in urban K-12 education... from a safe distance.

I believe that I went into this experience from the viewpoint that my situation was hopeless, and I have come away with a new feeling of thankfulness in one sense that we have a good of educational system.

I have always felt that I was open and accepting, but I found myself thinking that Cincinnati was not a place where I could teach.

I was shocked when someone in our group needed a restroom, and it had to be unlocked for him. Later, as we wandered down the hall, the security guard was told to go check the bathroom and to lock it back. At this point, I realized there were freedoms in our rural school setting that I take for granted.

This trip reconfirmed my childhood decision to exit the urban setting I was born into as quickly as I could. Our

aimless lunchtime drive around the streets of Cincinnati was enough to reinforce this. Cities always make me feel like I am slowly suffocating.

Gruenewald, in his discussion of the pedagogy of place asks, "What are our places telling us and teaching us about our possibilities?"<sup>45</sup> Visiting a place outside of your own can become a catalyst for creating a new vision that compels you to want to initiate change:

I reflected on parts of my teaching that are disengaging and tried to think of ways to change them.

I left Cincinnati with determination to tap into the resources that teachers in my school have and use them to the benefit of my students.

I think of what might be if Knox County had Russian and Japanese language teachers who had the energy and caring of the four ladies we observed. Our students need this opportunity to grow beyond East Tennessee and appreciate diversity and cultures other than their own.

The experience I have had in visiting three schools in the Cincinnati school system will influence my role as an administrator in my individual school as well as in the school system.

The reflections were overflowing with proof that adventuring into the unknown prompts growth and generates vision that has far-reaching implications:

The vision to take the truth and the ideas from the place of Cincinnati to inspire me in my own educational place or setting and to compose my own stories of change and success is my hope.

From this experience, I plan to work and teach to promote greater appreciation for people of different languages and/or cultures.

The opportunities available to these students were what inspired me to look at ways to implement some of the curriculum into our schools in my district. The observation of these characteristics has inspired me to come back to my district and renew my efforts to motivate and inspire teachers and cultivate the passion needed to teach students effectively.

I may or may not be able to fix students' dysfunctional home lives, but I can offer the adequate resources and support to ensure them a better life and a rewarding educational experience.

I came away from my experiences in the Cincinnati school system inspired to work harder and do more than I had previously. I realized that the only barriers that I faced in my work were the blinders that I developed from not looking around at what was going on in the education community and my lack of desire to give a little more effort to achieve the goals that I had set for myself in my job as well as those that we had set for our school.

These future aspirations to action demonstrate one of the most powerful aspects of learning that occurred as a result of this place-conscious learning experience. Stepping outside of your routine, context, and familiar surroundings allows for a fresh perspective that inspires action.

### Going Home

Based on the analysis of the reflections from members of the UTK cohort, it appears that adult learners go through a series of cognitive processes when they encounter familiar proceedings in an unfamiliar place. First, leaving your place and adventuring into the unknown opens your mind, widens your lens, and stimulates learning. Second, when we encounter a new context, we instinctively make connections to our own place, but we also begin to grapple with questions that emerge from the discomfort of confronting inconsistencies. Third, at this point we dispel old myths, create new beliefs, or confirm previous hunches that expand our understanding of an unknown phenomenon. Fourth, we eventually make judgments about the merit of what we see. Finally, we make a choice in our minds to either reject what we find and return to the comfort of what we know, or we internalize new insights that compel us to want to effect change.

### Conclusion

A “compassionate sense of place” involves embracing an ethic of care incorporating interpersonal, cultural, and environmental elements into the understanding of one’s self and one’s place, the widening of the individual and collective moral vision and sense of community.<sup>46</sup> However, the work of this particular learning community has only begun. Admittedly, visiting only three schools in a system that has more than 80 can be characterized only as a good start. The Cincinnati cohort is due to make its initial visit to East Tennessee early in 2005 to complete the first cycle. The Urban/Rural Exchange is still in the early *My Place/Your Place* phases. Our long-term goal, though, is to find *Our Place*. We want to become the kind of adult learning community for whom any single place is too small in our quest to keep K-12 teaching as fresh as it is challenging.

### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Author’s Note: This Graduate Studies Cohort consists of two elementary principals, one high school principal, a district science coordinator, assistant superintendent, federal programs coordinator, special education administrator, director of student living at the Tennessee School for the Deaf, and two teachers. We arrived with very little in common, took all our dissertation coursework together for two years, and became a very strong learning community.

<sup>2</sup> Carl Sandburg, *The Sandburg Treasury: Prose and Poetry for Young People* (New York, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich: 1950), 222.

<sup>3</sup> See <http://web.utk.edu/~aramp/ruexchange>.

<sup>4</sup> Randolph Haluza-DeLay, “Developing Compassionate Sense of Place,” <http://csopconsulting.tripod.com/envcap>.

<sup>5</sup> Michael Fullan, *The New Meaning of Educational Change* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2001).

<sup>6</sup> Gail Furman and Robert Starrat, “Leadership for Democratic Community in Schools,” in *The Educational Leadership Challenge: Redefining Leadership for the 21st Century*, Joe Murphy, Ed. (Chicago, Illinois: National Society for the Study of Education, 2002): 105-133.

<sup>7</sup> David A. Gruenewald, “Foundations of Place: A Multidisciplinary Framework for Place-Conscious Education,” *American Educational Research Journal* 40 (Fall 2003): 619.

<sup>8</sup> Glenda J. Ross, “An Opportunity for Cross-Cultural, Project-Based Learning on the Internet in My Place, Your Place, and Our Place,” A manuscript submitted for publication.

<sup>9</sup> Gruenewald, “Foundations of Place.”

<sup>10</sup> Ross, “An Opportunity for Cross-Cultural, Project-Based Learning.”

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Winifred Gallagher, *The Power of Place: How Our Surroundings Shape Our Thoughts, Emotions, and Actions* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1993).

<sup>13</sup> Gruenewald, 621.

<sup>14</sup> Russell Olwell “Schools and Universities: A New Social Contract,” *Education Week* (June 16, 2004), 43.

<sup>15</sup> Gruenewald, “Foundations of Place.”

<sup>16</sup> Ross, “An Opportunity for Cross-Cultural, Project-Based Learning.”

<sup>17</sup> Furman and Starrat, “Leadership for Democratic Community in Schools.”

<sup>18</sup> Rick Ross, Bryan Smith, and Charlotte Roberts, “The Wheel of Learning: Mastering the Rhythm of a Learning Organization,” in *The Fifth Discipline Fieldbook*, Peter Senge, Rick Ross, Bryan Smith, Charlotte Roberts, and Art Kleiner, Eds. (New York: Currency/Doubleday, 1994), 59-64.

<sup>19</sup> Senge et al., *The Fifth Discipline Fieldbook*.

<sup>20</sup> Siegfried Ramler, “Global Education for the 21st Century,” in *Kaleidoscope: Readings in Education*, Kevin Ryan and James Michael Cooper, Eds. (Boston, Massachusetts: Houghton Mifflin, 1992): 434-438.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Gruenewald, “Foundations of Place.”

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

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<sup>26</sup> Joseph A. Maxwell, *Qualitative Research Design: An Interactive Approach* (Thousand Oaks, California: Sage, 1996).

<sup>27</sup> *Ethnograph*. Qualis Research Associates, <http://www.qualisresearch.com>.

<sup>28</sup> Gruenewald, “Foundations of Place.”

<sup>29</sup> Sharan B. Merriam’s, *Qualitative Research and Case Study Applications in Education: Revised and Expanded from Case Study Research in Education* (San Francisco, California: Jossey-Bass, 1998).

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<sup>32</sup> *No Child Left Behind Act of 2001*, 20 U.S.C. 6301 et seq. (2002).

<sup>33</sup> Parker J. Palmer, *To Know as We Are Known* (San Francisco, California: Harper & Row, 1993), 72.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 74.

<sup>35</sup> John Dewey, *Experience and Education* (New York: Macmillan and Company, 1938).

<sup>36</sup> Theodore R.Sizer and Nancy. F. Sizer, "Grappling," in *Contemporary Issues in Curriculum* 3d ed., Allan C. Orstein, Linda S. Behar-Horenstein, and Edward F. Pajak, Eds. (Boston, Massachusetts: Allyn and Bacon, 2003), 143.

<sup>37</sup> Palmer, 66.

<sup>38</sup> Dewey, 16.

<sup>39</sup> Palmer, 73.

<sup>40</sup> Gruenewald, 645.

<sup>41</sup> Maxine Greene, "Art and Imagination," in Orstein et al., 36-42.

<sup>42</sup> William Glasser, "A New Look at School Failure and School Success," in Orstein et al., 231-238.

<sup>43</sup> Glasser, 232.

<sup>44</sup> Ross, "An Opportunity for Cross-Cultural, Project-Based Learning."

<sup>45</sup> Gruenewald, 639.

<sup>46</sup> Haluza-DeLay, 5.